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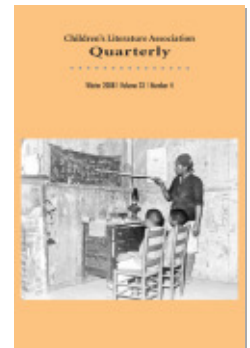
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“Something Very Old and Very Slow”: *Coraline*, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form

Richard Gooding

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When *Coraline* appeared in the spring of 2002, Neil Gaiman had already written one book for young readers, *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish*, but he was best known as the author of *American Gods* and the adult graphic novel series *The Sandman*. Early reviews of *Coraline* heralded Gaiman's emergence as a major writer for children, noting the novel's similarity to the Alice books while emphasizing its gothic effects. Foremost among the preferred adjectives were "creepy" (Berry, Pullman, Zipp, Ivey, Burkam 755, Roback et al., Rev. of "*Coraline*") and "eerie" (Austin, Garza, Svirin, Rev. of "*Coraline*"). Other terms included "surreal" (Pratt, Ivey), "nightmarish" and "odd" (Shook 184), "weird" and "unsettling" (Geras), "ominous" (Roback et al.), and "macabre" (De Lint 30). The possibility of a psychoanalytic reading, already implicit in many of these terms, was raised almost immediately in Adèle Geras's brief *Times Educational Supplement* review. Soon after, Philip Pullman noted that the book "occupies a territory somewhere between Lewis Carroll's *Alice* and Catherine Storr's classic fantasy of warning and healing, *Marianne Dreams*," while Anita Burkam, in *Horn Book Magazine*, referred to the "charged and often horrific flotsam from the subconscious" (755).

A second pattern in the early reception of *Coraline* can also be detected. Anxiety that the book might prove too frightening for younger readers appears among customer reviews on both sides of the Atlantic, at such online sites as Amazon.com and Bookcrossing.com, and occasionally among professional and trade reviews (for example, Zipp; Leung). Almost from the moment of *Coraline*'s publication, Gaiman can be detected guiding the reception of his novel and deflecting criticism that the story is too scary for youngsters. In a May 2002 interview with Booksense.com, Gaiman claims a double audience for the novel. Adults, he reports, "found it really scary and disturbing, and they're not sure it's a good book for kids." Children, by contrast, "read it as an

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adventure. . . . They don't get nightmares, and they don't find it scary." He then identifies a cognitive gap between adult and young readers: "I think . . . that kids don't realize how much trouble Coraline is in—she is in *big* trouble—and adults read it and think, 'I know how much trouble you're in.'" It is a position that worms its way into subsequent reviews, particularly those that treat the novel as fantasy rather than writing for children (for example, C. White; Speer). Even more tendentially, Gaiman remarks: "The thing I find oddest . . . is those people who, after reading it, tell me that it seemed really familiar. . . . familiar in that the shapes, once they've read them, just sort of assimilated into the way they saw the world. They felt they'd always known them." It is at about this point that one begins to suspect that the author of the *Sandman* series has been reading Freud.

Criticism from D. H. Lawrence, to W. K. Wimsatt, to Roland Barthes has made it a truism that writers have no particular privilege in interpreting their own works. Moreover, generalizations about children's responses are notoriously problematic, and it is worth remembering Michael Benton's caution that "the most sensitive probing with the most sophisticated instruments has so far succeeded only in introducing pictures of dubious authenticity" (81). Adult responses tend to get in the way, and recent work on "cross-writing" has uncovered a vast range of effects in texts that "activate . . . a traffic between phases of life we persist in regarding as opposites" (Knoepfmacher and Myers vii). While these responses are as likely to embody "a colloquy between past and present selves" (vii) as to open up "fissures" between young and mature responses (xiii), they seem unlikely to remain hermetically independent of one another. I suspect, then, that most adult readers are a little suspicious of Gaiman's claim that children read the text as *pure* adventure and that they are all completely oblivious to the frightening elements or to the fact that Coraline is in "*big* trouble"—though the kind of trouble she faces may remain elusive for children, as it does for many adult readers. In my household, an early attempt at listening to the audiobook Gaiman narrates sent my four-year-old running from the room and made her seven-year-old sister insist that we stop the CD *right now*. A year later, when the older girl agreed to a second reading—though not another attempt at the audio recording—most of her interruptions and questions had to do with elements she identified as "creepy" or "weird."

Despite the futility of assigning mutually exclusive readerly responses to adults and children, Gaiman's remarks suggest the possibility of theorizing a double audience, and the term they point toward is "the uncanny," a relative newcomer to the critical lexicon of children's literature. At the immediate level of style, uncanny effects disclose narratorial techniques that encourage the divergent responses upon which any double readership might rest. Applied specifically to Coraline's affective responses, the uncanny offers clues to the psychological costs of Coraline's renegotiation of her relationship with her parents. As significantly, Gaiman's decidedly unsettling handling of a narrative form that has traditionally offered comfort and closure to fantasy constitutes

an important technical innovation that opens new pathways of inquiry into the relationship between maturation and repression.

Uncanniness, Psychonarration, and Double Readership

In the field of children's literature, the uncanny has only lately begun to attract critical attention. In one of the first studies on the subject, Karen Coats argues that the uncanny is "precisely what is excluded from children's literature" and that picture books for the young "underwrite" the uncanny by tracing the child's transit through the anal stage, conceived in Lacanian terms ("Underwriting the Uncanny" 495–96).¹ More recently, Roberta Seelinger Trites introduced a special issue of *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* by identifying the uncanny as an underexplored quality in children's literature (162), and the concept has found its way into interpretations of books for older children and young adults (for example, Armstrong and Rudd 164–70, King 73–80, Jackson 157–76). Outside the field of children's literature, literary applications of the term have a much longer history, dating to Freud's classic essay, "*Das Unheimlich*" (1919). This study remains germane for many reasons, not least of which is its catalogue of elements that give rise to a queasy amalgam of recognition and unfamiliarity that (for the adult reader at least) "belongs to . . . all that arouses dread and creeping horror" (368). These include doubles, déjà vu, the dead, the immediate granting of wishes, live burial, blinding, dismemberment, coincidences implying fate, inanimate objects coming to life, loss of distinction between imagination and reality, and occasions when a symbol "takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes" (398). Most significantly for the study of children's literature, Freud opens up the possibility of a cognitive and affective dissonance between adult and child readers. For Freud, the *unheimlich* occurs "when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (403). In the first case, the uncanny object elicits a "morbid anxiety" that emerges "irrespective of whether it originally aroused dread or some other affect"; in the second, it signals the return of "a phase of individual development corresponding to [the] animistic stage in primitive men" (394). By definition, then, the young child's sensitivity to the uncanny is limited because the process of repression is ongoing and she has not yet surmounted the animistic stage of development.

The uncanny has been subject to numerous reformulations, notably by Heidegger, Kristeva (in her work on abjection), and Lacan, and Freud's list of uncanny elements seems capable of endless proliferation, as evidenced in Nicholas Royle's recent book-length study. Nonetheless, in his discussion of E. T. A. Hoffman, Freud himself codifies an array of literary conventions of the uncanny while formulating a central insight into the relationship between the uncanny and fantasy literature. Freud notes that uncanny effects are absent from fairy tales because "the animistic system of beliefs is frankly adopted":

uncanny elements emerge only when the writer “pretends to move into the world of common reality” (404–5). In his study of the Fantastic, Todorov, while partly distancing himself from Freud’s use of the term, posits a special definition of the uncanny as the resolution into a rational explanation of the uncertainty that adheres to the Fantastic, however “incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected that [explanation] may be” (46). Todorov emphasizes events that occupy an ambiguous position between the natural and the supernatural, but he briefly identifies a second boundary: that between the real and the imaginary (36). While Todorov argues that instances of this second variety of the Fantastic become uncanny when they are explained by madness, the distinction between real and imaginary can as easily be accounted for in the developmental terms adumbrated in Freud’s essay. And it is precisely this second pattern of uncertainty that Maria Nikolajeva identifies as a central epistemological difference between fairy tale and fantasy: the possibility of reading the fantasy narrative as the product of internally coherent rules of “magic” (as apply in fairy tales) or as the protagonist’s “dreams, visions, hallucinations, or imaginings” (“Fairy Tale and Fantasy” 153).

Uncanny effects in *Coraline* are aided by Gaiman’s technical innovations to a familiar narrative pattern featuring a border between real and fantasy worlds, a pattern that in adolescent fiction allows for the construction of a safe milieu for the playing out of id fantasies (Noel-Smith 200). In the pattern’s simplest form, the border is very strict: a dozing Alice passes through the mirror into Looking-glass House, sleep transports Marianne to the world she has drawn during the day, the wardrobe opens into Narnia. The gateway is typically stable, though only intermittently open: trying to prove her truthfulness to her siblings, Lucy finds only a wardrobe; Marianne dreams only after she has added new elements to her picture with The Pencil. While conventional deployment of this pattern usually imposes strict boundaries between real and fantasy worlds, thereby containing uncanny effects within the fantasy realm, Gaiman begins to blur these boundaries almost immediately. The opening paragraphs, with their emphasis on agedness (“It was a very old house . . . with huge old trees” [3]) and things being *under* other things (“[I]t had an attic under the roof and a cellar under the ground and an overgrown garden” [3]) are presented independent of Coraline’s perspective and offer early indications that order is threatened by ancient and still hidden forces. The menacing undertones are soon intensified by the descent of a “mist that hung like blindness” (21) and by the strange behavior of “the crazy old man upstairs” (6), though at first his talk of mouse circuses can be explained away as the fabrications of a man who enjoys teasing children. Even the characters’ names are subtly off-kilter: Coraline’s defeats the adults around her, and the elision in Miss Spink’s name hints at an identity collapsing in on itself.

Although the fantasies Coraline will play out are not immediately clear, much of the prevailing imagery of the other house she discovers is anticipated in a hallucinatory episode occurring late at night and the dreams it sparks.

Coraline is “almost asleep” (10) when she hears a noise that she gets up to investigate. At one point, noticing that her shadow “looked like a thin giant woman” (11), she passes by her parents’ bedroom, follows a moving shadow that reminds her of a spider, and finds that the drawing-room door is now ajar. When she returns to bed, she dreams fitfully of “black shapes with little red eyes and sharp yellow teeth” (11) that sing a variation of the song she will soon hear in the other house:

*We are small but we are many
We are many we are small
We were here before you rose
We will be here when you fall.* (12)

The verses indicate that Coraline will fail before powers that are both ancient and enduring, and in the first two lines the echoes of the words of the Gadarene demon (Mark 5:9) hint that Coraline will have to contend with forces of fragmentation and disintegration.

The house Coraline discovers on the other side of the drawing room is, for one of Gaiman’s posited audiences, a near-literal manifestation of the *unheimlich*: a home that is familiar but unknown, an instance of what “ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light” (Freud 376). There are doubles, the dead, talking animals, toys coming to life, the constant threat of blindness and mutilation (not only in the black button eyes of the other parents but also in Coraline’s blinding of the other father and the bargain she strikes with the other mother), the apparent reading of Coraline’s mind, immediate wish fulfillment, and so on. The most striking uncanny effects are achieved independent of Coraline’s perspective, and they emerge from arresting, nightmare transformations of mundane conversations:

“How do I know you’ll keep your word?” asked Coraline.
“I swear it,” said the other mother. “I swear it on my own mother’s grave.”
“Does she have a grave?” asked Coraline.
“Oh yes,” said the other mother. “I put her in there myself. And when I found her trying to crawl out, I put her back.” (92–93)

While many adult readers undoubtedly perceive such moments as uncanny, children are theoretically less sensitive to them. With some notable exceptions to which I will return later, Coraline, with whom younger readers are likely to identify, generally seems immune to feelings of uncanniness. Elements related to animism—the living toys in the other bedroom, for example—are just intensely interesting to her (“*This is more like it*, thought Coraline” [30]), even though she is initially presented as having outgrown her toys and will later feign interest in her dolls to outwit the other mother. Elsewhere Coraline’s perceptions and feelings play a minor and ambiguous role in supporting the mature reader’s uncanny responses:

Coraline walked down the corridor uneasily. There was something very familiar about it.

The carpet beneath her feet was the same carpet they had in her flat. The wallpaper was the same wallpaper they had. The picture hanging in the hall was the same that they had hanging in their hallway at home. (27)

Any impulse on the reader's part to characterize Coraline's response as uncanny is at least partly thwarted by succeeding indications that Coraline is simply disoriented, and by the suspicion that she is still anxious about breaking her mother's rule about entering the drawing room.

Coraline's muted responses are in keeping with Gaiman's insistently concrete prose style. To be sure, the strong emphasis on visual and auditory stimuli, the lack of concern with abstractions and introspection, and the simple, repetitive, and parallel syntax deftly accommodate the young reader's capacities and interests, but the style also delicately identifies the limits of Coraline's self-awareness. In the language that Nikolajeva has recently applied to adolescent literature, Gaiman favors strategies of "psychonarration"—narrative modes designed to convey "the unconscious, the vague, the unuttered feelings, by finding adequate linguistic expressions for them" ("Imprints of the Mind" 180). Tendencies toward what clinical psychologists term "blunt affect" indicate that Coraline either does not understand or cannot confront her feelings, and the narrator teases out her emotions in a variety of ways. Spiders make Coraline "intensely uncomfortable" (10), but with a single exception (81), subsequent references to spiders—literal and figurative—appear without clear indications of the emotions they provoke, and the reader is left the task of surmising Coraline's feelings. Moreover, particularly in the early stages of the novel, Coraline's emotions tend to be presented in their physical manifestations. Her heart pounds or she pushes herself back in her chair, or more strikingly:

Coraline woke up in the night. She went to her parents' bedroom, but the bed was made and empty. The glowing green numbers on the digital clock glowed 3:12 A.M.

All alone, in the middle of the night, Coraline began to cry. There was no other sound in the empty flat.

She climbed into her parents' bed, and after a while, went to sleep. (52)

When the narrator characterizes Coraline's feelings more fully than she herself can articulate, he tends to emphasize cognitive dimensions over affect. He may, for instance, offer precise terms to formulate Coraline's perceptions (her other room is a "parody" of her room at home [66], while the argument between Miss Spink and Miss Forcible is "as old and comfortable as an armchair" [19]), or he may generalize her experience without attributing any clear emotional content, as when she awakens in her other room: "[i]t is astonishing just how much of what we are can be tied to the beds we wake up in in the morning, and

it is astonishing how fragile that can be" (67). When Coraline is under stress, a preference for the nonspecific verb "feel"—sometimes qualified by terms like "dislocated" (67) or "uncomfortable" (12, 32)—maintains the opacity of her emotions.

Gaiman's preference for these psychonarrative strategies allows readers greater interpretive latitude and therefore helps establish and maintain the double audience Gaiman claims for his work. However, by masking Coraline's anxieties, these strategies complicate the task of assessing what kind of "big trouble" Coraline faces. While Coraline seems comfortable with the animistic world of fairy tales, narratorial coyness about her emotional responses to elements most closely associated with repression—dismemberment, live burial, blindness—places the precise extent of Coraline's psychic development in the shadows. Clues to this second wellspring of the uncanny—repression—lie in the innovations to the narrative pattern Gaiman inherits from Lewis Carroll and C. S. Lewis.

Family Romance, "Protective Coloration," and the Self-Aware Child

While the ominous effect of the opening chapters rests on their lack of a precise threat, Coraline has clear grievances, even if (as is typical of Gaiman's protagonists) she doesn't articulate her suffering.² As an only child without playmates or school to occupy her, Coraline is particularly vulnerable to the benign neglect of her parents, though as Karen Coats notes, her boredom indicates that she is on the verge of developing an independent sense of self ("Between Horror" 87).³ Coraline feels too old for the kinds of solitary play that her toys afford, and she is bored with television and videos and her books. Her parents work at home but have the kinds of jobs—doing things on computers, mainly—that to children do not seem like work at all, and they tend to foist her off onto each other or the neighbors. As a means of keeping Coraline amused, the strategy fails, and Coraline is sharply aware that adults in general cannot remember her name and tend to forget that she is in the room.

Coraline's first journey into the other house is precipitated by her father's trip to London and her mother's indifference to Coraline's wish for unusual school clothes. As if in answer to an anger that is implied but never articulated, the other house is a place where all wishes are fulfilled—and not just for Coraline. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible return to the stage as their young selves to perform before an admiring audience "[f]or ever and always" (44), while their dogs eat nothing but the chocolate they are denied in the real world. For Coraline, the first trip establishes a family romance in which all her complaints against her parents are answered and her wishes fulfilled. Her other bedroom is filled with "remarkable things" (30) and the food is "wonderful" (28), neither the carefully prepared but unpalatable "recipes" that her father cooks, nor her mother's careless and unappetizing dishes "that never tasted of anything" (29). It is, as Coraline notes, "much more interesting than at home" (45), and the other

mother's promise—which is explicitly formulated during Coraline's second trip—transparently redresses all of Coraline's grievances: "We're here to love you and feed you and play with you and make your life interesting" (60). The promise, if Coraline is willing to pay the price of self-mutilation, is also "for ever and always" (46). Eventually, Coraline will proclaim, "I don't *want* whatever I want" (120), but for the time being she sees only the prospect of having her wishes fulfilled immediately while sensing that the price is too high.

If the other house initially redresses the slights of home life, at the simplest level—the one Gaiman imagines for his youngest readers—it is the logical expression of Coraline's self-advertised social identity. Coraline fashions herself as "an explorer" (15), and the narrator relentlessly applies the verbs "explore" (ten times in the first chapter), "discover" (three times), and "find" (twice) to her actions. Coraline's first entrance into the other house is of a piece with her imagined identity as an explorer, but it is also a characteristic act of defiance against adult prohibitions. Just as she sets off to find the dangerous well as soon as she is told to stay away from it and later tests the door in the drawing room after Mr. Bobo relays the mice's warning, Coraline seizes the opportunity afforded by her mother's absence to unlock the door once more, even though she knows she is "doing something wrong" (27). Read as an adventure story—or more precisely as a fairy tale of an intrepid child's successful transgressions against adult authority—the ensuing narrative offers the satisfactions of a latter-day Molly Whuppie, as the resourceful girl outwits and punishes parent figures while stealing their most precious objects.

But neither adventure nor the fantasy of a harmonious family life exhausts the possibilities of the other house, and the most troubling and refractory elements of the fantasy world reflect not just Coraline's desires but her anxieties as well. Foremost among these is Coraline's fear that the increasing independence her real parents demand of her amounts to rejection and abandonment. When Coraline returns to the other house in search of her parents, the other mother presents an illusion of the real parents' happiness at giving up Coraline. Although Coraline detects the fraud, she experiences "a tiny doubt inside her, like a maggot in an apple core" (63)—though again the phrasing places cognition in the foreground while making affect depend on the reader's inference from the simile. The alternatives to parental abandonment hinge on distinguishing between a love that recognizes and accepts otherness and the parasitic substitute that destroys difference. As the cat says, the other mother wants to love "[s]omething that isn't her," but may also want "something to eat" (65), a suspicion confirmed by the ghosts of the captive children, who report, "she fed on us, until now we've nothing left of ourselves" (85). The language of consumption, of course, suggests assimilation, and taken as a projection of Coraline's fantasy, it reflects a childish misapprehension of the nature and possibilities of parental love. The "exploring game" (92) therefore becomes a test of Coraline's capacity to surmount an infantile desire for permanent (re)union with the mother. In other words, although Coraline imagines the

game as a struggle against a hostile antagonist, it is more fundamentally a struggle against her own desire for dependency and identification, a desire not far beneath the explicit demands Coraline makes of her real parents. To lose the game would be to accept perpetual childhood—to become a “bad copy” (120) of a real person or suffer the more radical infantilization that afflicts the ghost children, with their slow loss of language, memory, and gender.

Coraline’s struggle can be theorized, but I would argue not in a way that offers much hope for the tidy resolution implicit in the “portal” narrative form Gaiman chooses. In Lacanian terms, the positive movement of Coraline’s self-construction as brave can be seen as a series of attempts to conform to an “Ideal-I” that Coraline derives from her father, whose bravery she recounts to the cat as they prepare to return to the other house. After entering the other house, Coraline catches her reflection in the mirror, “looking . . . a little braver than she actually felt” (76). The experience indicates both her growing awareness of her new social identity (a few hours earlier her reflection seemed *completely* alien [61]) and her recognition that her feelings fall short of the ideal to which she submits. In another near-literalism, the passage exemplifies the mirror stage in the way Lacan eventually came to understand it as an ongoing “assumption of the armour of an alienating identity” (4). Subsequent references confirm Coraline’s imperfect attempts to conform to the Ideal-I, while implying that maturity is, in the language of nature programs, a kind of “protective coloration” (7)—that is, the acquisition of a false identity designed to protect the self against hostile forces. When Coraline enters Miss Spink and Miss Forcible’s theatre, she does “not believe” her self-assurances of bravery (100), but by the time she prepares to see the other crazy old man upstairs, she “almost believe[s]” them (114). And in her final confrontation with the other Mr. Bobo, she reflects: “I’m not frightened, she told herself, and as she thought it she knew that it was true. There was nothing here that frightened her” (117). This short-lived moment of self-assurance comes as Coraline, in finding the soul of the third child, triumphs over the fantasy of utopian life the other mother offers and imagines herself as perfectly brave. But when the rat escapes with the last child’s soul, Coraline’s carefully constructed identity collapses, and she feels the despair of failure and “cold loss” (122). Even in the other house the fantasy of self-sufficiency is precarious and risks disintegration in the face of infantile desires.

As the strong emotional response to failure suggests, Coraline’s attempts at conforming to the Ideal-I of herself as brave coincide with a heightened awareness of her own emotions. During her imprisonment in the closet before the exploring game begins, Coraline inches closer to that self-awareness, but the language of physical response still implies a degree of detachment and denial: “Somewhere inside her Coraline could feel a huge sob welling up. And then she stopped it, before it came out. She took a deep breath and let it go” (81). But by the time she enters the other Miss Spink and Miss Forcible’s flat, “there was nothing that she could think of as scary as having [the creature] look at

her" (101). As Coats observes, the degenerate forms of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible resemble fetuses, suggesting an "infantile state of undifferentiation" ("Between Horror" 88)—and the great threat to Coraline's burgeoning sense of selfhood. Little wonder, then, that from this point on the language of emotion becomes much more specific, with words like "afraid" (101), "scared" (102), and "worried" (108) specifying Coraline's feelings, and terms like "revulsion" (110), "horror" (110, 147), and "angrily" (145) attaching themselves to her physical responses and speech.

Before escaping from the other mother, Coraline must confront the costs of her increased self-awareness. The first of Coraline's two uses of "protective coloration" against the other mother depends upon Coraline's deliberately assuming an *appearance* of the muted emotions that marked her earlier identity as a dependent child. Here her instrumental use of the cat, Gaiman's most obvious borrowing from Carroll, is crucial in conveying Coraline's state of mind to the reader. The cat, who has a voice "like the voice at the back of Coraline's head . . . but a man's voice, not a girl's" (35), has already fulfilled numerous functions as Coraline's main interlocutor; as a device that allows Coraline to articulate her thoughts on identity, naming, bravery, and parents; as the one stable indicator of which world Coraline is in; and, crucially, as the projection of the untapped resources that allow Coraline to retrieve the last soul. Here it acts as a physical manifestation of the emotions Coraline now recognizes but must not show. As the other world begins to collapse into "a small child's scrawl" (126), Coraline strokes the cat; she notices "how hard its heart was beating" (125) and finds she "wanted to hold on to it, like a teddy bear, for reassurance" (127), details that belie her remarkable composure and remind us that her anxieties and challenges are still those of a child.

As predicted by the narrative pattern Gaiman inherits, the ruse works and Coraline escapes. The act of closing the door on the other mother confirms the resolution of Coraline's conflicts with her parents and her successful integration into a web of social relationships, a point underscored by the last-second interventions of Coraline's parents and the rescued children. Success is ensured when Coraline hears the voice of her "real, wonderful, maddening, infuriating, glorious mother" say simply, "Well done, Coraline" (134), a sign of approval that *precedes* and therefore enables her closing the door. The language concisely and triumphantly discloses Coraline's burgeoning awareness of her real mother's otherness and acceptance of her own varied feelings toward that otherness. Typical of the narrative assurances of the portal pattern, the return home indicates that all problems have been resolved: "the sky had never seemed so sky, the world had never seemed so world"; in short, "Nothing . . . had ever been so *interesting*" (137).

But the narrative does not end here, and the tidy outcome promised by the return home founders in the face of Gaiman's second-act narrative disruptions. Much as Lacan affirms that the Ideal-I is forever unattainable, Gaiman refuses to present Coraline's conflict with the other mother (and by implica-

tion her real mother) as resolved. To be sure, Coraline's return finds her more independent, more aware of her feelings, more emotionally and physically demonstrative, and more engaged with the world. As Coraline hugs her parents and Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, and talks with Mr. Bobo about his mouse circus, readers may realize for the first time how emotionally isolated she has been. But while all this is true and Coraline has certainly renegotiated her relationship with her parents—recognizing, for instance, that her increasing independence and engagement with the outside world miraculously entails no loss of their affection or approval—the initial joy of the return home proves impossible to sustain, and Coraline again finds herself needing to outwit the other mother. Looking for the causes of her renewed troubles inevitably leads to a reconsideration of elements of the other house that, despite Coraline's characteristic emotional restraint, hint at her susceptibility to uncanny effects, thereby signaling complications to her psychic development.

Uncanny Coraline and the Transformation of the “Portal” Narrative

If fantasy retains the possibility of both supernatural and rational explanations (Todorov 25), and if rational explanations include the products of “psychical or emotional disturbance” (Nikolajeva, “From Fairy Tale to Fantasy” 153), then in *Coraline* any uncanny elements that cannot be ascribed to vestiges of animistic belief in the young protagonist would necessarily point to repression. Among these, the moments that are most amenable to precise interpretation tend to point to an ongoing rivalry between Coraline and her mother. For example, Coraline's failure to see her other mother in the mirror (a moment that may remind us of the reflection of the omnipotent caregiver that in Lacanian thought confronts the infant) provokes the other mother's claim that “Mirrors . . . are never to be trusted” (77). The episode suggests Coraline's denial of the other mother's power, but this power is inevitably disclosed in other ways—namely, in the other mother's slow transformation into a towering giant and the other father's doomed and fearful attempts at aiding Coraline and his eventual disintegration. Other uncanny images seem at first less inviting to very precise interpretations, but they too tend to cluster around the other mother and fall into classes of references that Freud associates with the castration complex—blindness and dismemberment (Freud 383, 397)—or the desire to return to the mother's womb (live burial [Freud 397]).

As the prominent placement of the story of Coraline's rescue from wasps by her father suggests, the rivalry with the other mother has enough reference to Coraline's father to acquire oedipal overtones. The wasp episode is an early memory that Coraline places in her old house “a long, long time ago” (56), when her parents still dressed her and her father would pick her up, something he has not done “in such a long time” (140). In retrospect, Coraline imagines herself as an explorer, but it is clear her explorations were aided by her parents. In her memory, Coraline had her father's undivided attention, and she could

enjoy a peculiar intimacy with him, as evidenced by their counting her father's wasp stings in the bath. It is a moment to which a classic Freudian reading might well attribute Coraline's discovery of sexual difference; in Lacanian terms, however, the father's explanation of the morality of bravery provides for Coraline an important entry into the symbolic order and becomes a reference point for two of her defining qualities: bravery and the capacity to explore. In Coraline's own mind, however, the precise significance of the wasp episode remains difficult to articulate: the emotionally resonant expression of parental love attaches to the original rescue, while the lesson about bravery derives from the secondary story of her father returning for his glasses. When the cat questions her about the relevance of the story, she seems a little confused and retreats to the position that she is rescuing her parents simply because they are her parents. But although Coraline cannot fully explain the relevance of her memory to her present actions, the episode simultaneously offers an account of the sources of Coraline's social identity and constructs a nostalgic, pre-oedipal past of harmonious family relations against which her present troubles can be measured.

It is therefore fitting that Coraline's decision to enter the other house is triggered by her father leaving town (a child-sized abandonment) and her quarrel with her mother over shopping (a rejection or a defeat by a rival), although, as I have argued, the "blunt affect" that characterizes Coraline's responses makes it difficult to assess how much anger she actually feels. While Coraline takes the animistic qualities of the other house in stride, evidence of her parents' sexuality proves much more challenging, and it tends to be presented in coded terms. Typically, the most difficult of these moments are presented in terms not of feelings but of Coraline's reasoned responses:

She crept back into the silent house, past the closed bedroom door inside which the other mother and the other father . . . what? She wondered. Slept? Waited? And then it came to her that, should she open the bedroom door she would find it empty, or more precisely that it was an empty room and it would remain empty until the exact moment that she opened the door. (66)

The double movement of Coraline's answer to the question of what her other parents do in their bedroom is revealing. At first, Coraline imagines that they are there, doing *something*, but would disappear if she opened the door. Upon reconsideration, she decides that they are absent but would appear if she looked for them. The first of her suspicions suggests a nascent understanding of her real parents' sexual relations, though Coraline stops short of completing the list of possibilities. The retreat from those possibilities to the childish position that her parents' existence has reference only to Coraline herself implies both knowledge of their sexuality and a refusal to confront that knowledge, and Coraline's relief emerges in her reflection that "[s]omehow" her revised interpretation "made it easier" (66). Evidently, Coraline has here entered the territory of repression that Freud marks as the second source of uncanniness.

The empty flat in the other house provides other striking evidence that Coraline's anxieties are constructed upon a foundation that she is unwilling to recognize. Conspicuously, Coraline does not even think to search the vacant flat until the other mother raises the possibility, even though exploring that part of the house was presumably the goal of Coraline's original expedition. The form the invitation takes—the other mother's pulling the key from her mouth—is in such striking contrast to the usual processes of consumption, assimilation, and disintegration that the very offer implies the possibilities of increased individuation and greater self-awareness. The vacant flat, with its "dust shadow" of an old bed and discolored patches where furniture once stood, leads Coraline to a dimly lit cellar:

It did not give up enough light even for Coraline to make out the things that had been painted onto the flaking cellar walls. The paintings seemed crude. There were eyes, she could see that, and things that might have been grapes. And other things, below them. Coraline could not be sure that they were paintings of people. (109)

The studied vagueness of this description of "what ought to have remained hidden and secret" (Freud 376)—literally so, in a world whose inhabitants must give up their eyes—is reminiscent of the repressive imagery of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," and, like Gilman's story, it is charged with simultaneous recognition of and refusal to recognize the erotic implications of the imagery. Here, in this place of "dust and damp and forgetting," Coraline encounters the debased "thing that was once her other father" (111), pities him, and in a gesture that exploits the latent potential of the button eyes, definitively blinds him before leaving the flat, locking the door, and carefully placing the key under the mat. If that last act suggests that Coraline may need to return sometime, the other mother confirms that the possibilities of the vacant flat have not been exhausted when she offers Coraline a second opportunity to explore the cellar, promising "other interesting things hidden down there" (129).

Coraline's encounters with the hidden currents of sexuality are further suggested by Gaiman's technical innovations to the narrative pattern he inherits, notably the progressive transformations of the boundary between the two houses. Coraline's first trip takes her through a corridor that leads away from the drawing room (there is, in effect, no drawing room in the other house), and at first the other house is barely distinguishable from her own. During Coraline's second trip the passage is much longer and draftier, and it leads to a fully differentiated other house, complete with its own drawing room and furnishings apparently left by the other mother's mother. The second journey entails further changes, including the disintegration of the other father and Misses Spink and Forcible, the collapse of the other world into a mist-world (during the first trip there had been a view from Coraline's room), and the flattening of the other house into a cartoonish, child-drawn sketch. The twin associations with disintegration and the artistic endeavors of childhood indicate

that Coraline is grappling more directly with the sources of her anxieties and hint at the consequences of failure. The way home brings further transformations that suggest Coraline is on the verge of identifying the true nature of the forces that threaten her. The first time Coraline touches the wall on her way home it is “warm and yielding,” as if “it were covered in a fine downy fur,” and Coraline “snatch[es]” her hand away; the second time, it is “hot and wet, as if she had put her hand in somebody’s mouth,” and she lets out a “small wail” (135). The experience horrifies her, and the heavy-handed imagery (it is the one moment likely to provoke derision during discussions of *Coraline* in a university children’s literature class) expresses the too-forceful return of repressed drives: Coraline, who in defeat wishes “the earth would swallow her up” (122)—a desire Freud links to “the phantasy . . . of intra-uterine existence” (397)—now in her triumph reacts to the undisguised equivalent with undisguised terror.

The second use of “protective coloration” (153) against the other mother introduces further complications to the “portal” narrative structure, simultaneously resolving the novel’s plot and disclosing Coraline’s failure to dispel her anxieties completely. In the lead-up to the ruse, Coraline’s actions are meticulously described, with a great deal of attention to her stagey speech and, not coincidentally, the string by which she carries the key. By the time Coraline’s plan becomes clear, readers may suspect that Coraline will use the string to snatch the key away at the last moment; however, she is only testing the strength of the paper tablecloth, and after the other mother’s hand plunges into the well with the key, Coraline “hauled the heavy planks back onto the well, covering it as carefully as she could. She didn’t want anything to fall in. She didn’t want anything ever to get out” (159). While it is clear that Coraline has defeated the other mother, the emphasis on Coraline’s desires is important. Coraline does the best she can, but whatever she hopes, there is no guarantee that the hand will remain in the well. More unsettling still is the fact that the hand retains possession of the key. Should the other mother’s hand escape, it will have the one thing needed to wreak havoc on Coraline: the means of unloosing the contents of the other house. The implication, I think, is clear: The final ruse is less a surmounting or resolution of Coraline’s oedipal rivalries than a repression of them. The other mother had to rebury her mother, and in time Coraline may have to rebury hers, too.

The remaining pages of the novel provide a carefully modulated return to normalcy. Traces of infection by the fantasy world remain, but they gradually retreat into the background: the cat appears to wink, though perhaps it doesn’t, and Mr. Bobo still speaks of communications from his mice. As Coraline falls asleep, however, she seems a little older, a little more mature. For the first time, she is not “nervous and apprehensive” before starting a new school year (161), and she seems to have definitively emerged from the world of animism. She “fancied she could hear sweet music” (161), and we are told that “[a]s the stars came out Coraline finally allowed herself to drift into sleep, while the gentle upstairs music of the mouse circus spilled out onto the warm evening air, telling

the world that the summer was almost done” (162). Coraline in her sleepiness is clearly imagining things, and the novel ends elegiacally on a note that evokes the lovely passage from *Charlotte’s Web* in which the crickets’ “sad monotonous song” reminds Fern that school is about to start: “‘Summer is over and gone,’ they sang. ‘Over and gone, over and gone. Summer is dying, dying’” (White 113). For the moment, at least, all is well, and the hopeful note seems a small concession to make to the form Gaiman inherits.

I would argue that the various refinements of the “portal” narrative pattern render the form a particularly resonant and nuanced mode for representing a child protagonist’s psychic development, a pattern that Gaiman finds compelling enough to return to in *Wolves in the Walls* (2004) and *MirrorMask* (2005).⁴ In its more traditional manifestations, the form offers false assurances relating to moralizing and educational tendencies inherited from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century models of writing for children: the psychological work that takes place in the fantasy world reaches closure, the protagonist returns home, and the magical effects, no longer being necessary, are suspended. The Pevensie children leave Narnia having established stable familial relations of respect, responsibility, and authority; in *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg returns from battling It with a new understanding of her own strength and her father’s limitations. While there are arguably always unresolved elements (*Marianne Dreams*, oddly, ends with Marianne dreaming), Gaiman’s final technical innovations to the pattern, which entail the infection of the “real” world—by now the quotation marks are necessary—by the psychic forces at play in the other house, are tacit recognitions of Coraline’s continued developmental struggles.

I have emphasized the interplay of style, narrative form, and uncanniness in the treatment of Coraline’s psychic development, but it is worth remembering Philip Pullman’s remark that Gaiman is “much too clever to be caught in the net of a single interpretation.” The approach I have used here sheds light on Coraline’s development but it does not fully settle the question of double readership or even the appeal of the novel to children. Young readers’ responses are notoriously elusive, perhaps for the very reasons that convincing portrayals of young protagonists pose such challenges for writers. In the same way that Coraline sometimes seems impervious to feelings of uncanniness and sometimes doesn’t, patterns of response among young readers are probably more complex than Gaiman lets on. My eight-year-old daughter interrupted our reading to tell me the presentation of needle, thread, and buttons to Coraline was “creepy,” but she seemed unperturbed by Coraline’s contemplations outside her other parents’ bedroom; later, the descent into the cellar didn’t elicit any remarks, except for the drawing on the wall, which was “weird.” And Gaiman’s generalization that children “don’t get nightmares” (“Interview”) did not match the experience of the nine-year-old sister of one of my students, who assuredly did. But although the novel taps into the fears of some young readers, it is not *just* the unsettling narrative of maturation I have presented here. Months after we finished *Coraline*, my daughter had forgotten the final ruse and, when re-

minded, seemed to think it was something of a flaw in the story—a response that should remind us of the possibility of yet other disconnects between young and mature readers. As suggested by the epigraph from G. K. Chesterton—“Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten” (n.p.)—the tale may provide the kind of preparation for adult life that Bruno Bettelheim once imagined for the fairy tale genre; thus, the unsettling elements may, ultimately, not loom that large for young readers. These complexities and unanswered questions indicate that the work on *Coraline*’s significance for young readers has only just begun.

Notes

1. Other early studies include a pair of essays by Lucy Rollin, one on detective work in the *Harriet the Spy* and the Nancy Drew series (Rollin and West 23–29) and the other on the emergence, suppression, and reappearance of an uncanny Mickey Mouse (Rollin and West 31–43).

2. In his adult fiction and graphic novels Gaiman displays a marked preference for traumatized and laconic protagonists, from the *Sandman* series’ Morpheus, who begins in silence and eventually rises to detached analytic commentary on his own past and sufferings, to Shadow, the protagonist of *American Gods*, who seems incapable of mourning his wife’s death or expressing any emotional response to his likely impending death under the blows of Czernobog’s hammer.

3. Coats’s brief and interesting account of *Coraline* (“Between Horror, Humour, and Hope” 86–89) in light of Gaiman’s uses of the gothic—the first academic treatment of *Coraline* I know of—appeared while this article was under review. To some extent Coats and I occupy similar psychoanalytic territory, but while Coats sees *Coraline* as an essentially well-behaved young girl whose story successfully chronicles “the development of a sophisticated sense of desire” (87) in the face of the temptations to regress to a state of dependency, I tend to see a somewhat more defiant *Coraline* whose development is more problematic—less definitive and more entangled with her relationship with her father—and more intimately tied to questions of style and narrative form.

4. Sustained discussion of these books is outside the scope of this article. My sense is that although Gaiman retains a somewhat porous border between fantasy and real worlds, neither book exploits the form as a mode of inquiry into psychic development as fully as *Coraline* does. Of the two, *Wolves in the Walls* works much better, and Coats has offered a compelling reading of the text as an ultimately reassuring tale of the fear of losing one’s home (“Between Horror, Humour, and Hope” 79–83). The surreal elements of *MirrorMask* seem much less in control and much less amenable to sustained—or at least coherent—interpretation.

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